



ESTABLISHED 1659

CITY OF NORWICH CONNECTICUT

NORWICH HUMAN SERVICES

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Raised Bill S.B. 110- An Act Concerning Fraud Prevention
in CT's Utility Termination Protection Programs.
Energy and Technology Committee
February 20, 2014

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Legislators,

My name is Lee-Ann Gomes and I am the supervisor of Social Work at Norwich Human Services, in Norwich CT and have been for the past 29 years. I can not oppose more stringently the provision in SB 110, which seeks to prevent fraud in CT's Utility Termination Protection Programs. Should this law pass, it will facilitate the discontinuance of utility services in the winter for CT's most low income, elderly and disabled populations.

I work with low income customers and have never seen an abuse of the winter moratorium protection. In fact, just the opposite, I have seen clients without utility service that we have had to advocate to have service restored during the winter, due to lack of communication and education from the utility company. On one occasion we went to the home of an elderly person whose home was so cold that we found a standing water frozen solid. She qualified for hardship but did not know and had spent half the winter without utilities. Her service was terminated in May due to non-payment and she had not been notified that she could have service restored in November. I find it to be the case, and not the exception, that companies do not inform customers of all their right; to pay 20% to avoid termination, to file for hardship, to see a company review officer. Often times it is not until they see an intervening agency, like mine, that the clients learn about their rights and they are protected from harm.

When people do not have utilities, pipes burst, properties become condemned and people are displaced unnecessarily. Property is damaged and repairs are exorbitant. If people remain at home without utilities they will resort to unsafe means of heating that could endanger the lives of all in the building resulting in fires or carbon monoxide poisoning. People who could pay their bill would do so to avoid these consequences

Allowing the PURA or any non-medical professionals to overturn the opinion of treating physicians is ludicrous. In our area doctors are already skittish about completing the medical forms on behalf of their patients. It has been reported to my by clients and physicians that NPU has convinced some that they are may be contributing to fraud or somehow acting unethically by signing what they know to be true; that their patient is medically compromised and will be further compromised without utility service.



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Parts of this bill presuppose that NPU has better resources to determine financial situation than DSS or SSA who have already run computer matches on people for income and asset determination. Providing verification from these entities should be proof enough to the utilities that their income and assets have been vetted by agencies much more capable than they to do so. I find it ironic that utility companies will not routinely do a budget with low income customers to determine fair repayment plans for the benefit of the client and yet they propose to review financial statements for the detriment of the customer.

The incident of fraud can not be so egregious that laws that protect people need to be weakened. If the numbers of people qualifying for hardship are increasing it is because of the economy. In our area, we have a 14 % poverty rate and an unemployment rate of 9.2. New London County is one of the slowest to recover from the recession nationwide. We are sandwiched between two casinos which are laying off, one of which is poised to let 125 workers go in the very near future. The economy is weak and business is struggling.

In our area, salaries and earnings of municipal utility workers has risen significantly, says an article in the Bulletin dated 8-4-13. Part of this, they state, is because of the horrible winter storms and overtime associated with it. That begs the question, if the winters are worsening why we would want to increase terminations during this period. .

Any attempt to make this vital protection more difficult to obtain will be detrimental to low income people, the disabled and elderly clients, all at a time when we are experiencing the severest cold weather patterns, the worst economic climate, highest unemployment and in the case of Norwich, skyrocketing rate hikes, profits and salaries of municipal utility workers.

Municipal companies wield a lot of power, in fact, they are virtually a monopoly. Residents who use a municipal company can not easily make the switch to another. Residents do not set rates or determine increases. Municipal utilities companies are not governed by our mayors or alderman who we can vote out of office. They have self appointed commissioners whose authority is rarely questioned.

I hope you see this bill for what it is; an attempt to increase lessening the protections of vulnerable people

Lee-Ann Gomes

Supervisor, NHS